



A taste of home

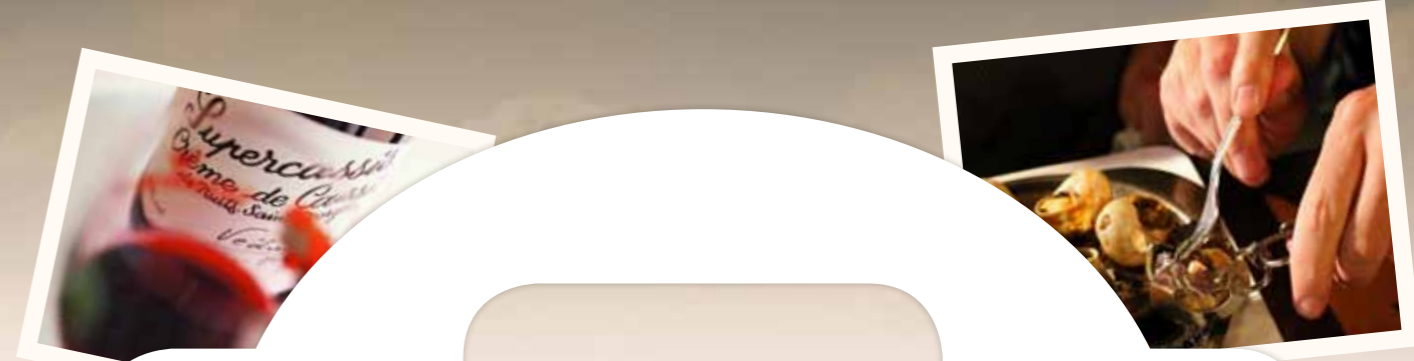
If the way to the heart is through the stomach, why not apply the same approach to finding your perfect location in France? *Paola Westbeek* serves up a generous helping of food for thought



France's culinary landscape is extraordinarily diverse. Each corner of the country boasts delectable products and traditional dishes that reflect its *terroir* and are part of its identity. Just think of a hearty *choucroute garnie* from Alsace, a fragrant *coq au vin* from Burgundy, a sunny *ratatouille* from Nice or a richly filled *cassoulet* from Languedoc. All of these dishes are part of France's immense gourmet repertoire.

Because food is such an integral part of French culture, getting to know France means discovering its varied cuisine. Let's take a culinary tour of four French regions and see what they have to offer. Our menu begins with wine-infused starters in Burgundy-Franche-Comté, continues with robust meat dishes in Nouvelle-Aquitaine, is followed by the bold cheeses of Hauts-de-France and ends with fresh and delicate desserts in Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur. *Allez-y et bon appétit!*

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Entrée

Burgundy-Franche-Comté



We begin our meal in Burgundy-Franche-Comté, a paradise not only for adventure

seekers who go there to hike, cycle, horseback ride or cross-country ski in the Vosges massif to the north-east and the Jura mountains to the south-east, but also for gourmets and wine lovers who delight in the region's abundant pleasures of the table.

One of the best ways to start a meal in France - and especially in Burgundy - is with a *kir*, the second most popular *apéritif* in the country after *pastis*. It is traditionally made with one-third blackcurrant liqueur (*crème de cassis*) and two-thirds of the somewhat acidic *aligoté* wine produced in the village of Bouzeron in the Côte Chalonnaise.

While sipping a *kir* and perusing the restaurant menu in one of the many attractive cities such as Beaune, Autun or Chalon-sur-Saône, you might be tempted to order *oeufs en meurette* as a starter (see above right). A classic in this part of the country,



it consists of poached eggs served with a sublimely aromatic red wine sauce, lardons and garlicky croutons.

Together with *coq au vin* and *boeuf bourguignon*, it is one of three traditional Burgundy dishes infused with the regional pinot noir. Two other great choices to start your meal would be a slice of chunky *jambon persillé* (a parsleyed ham terrine made with *aligoté* and sometimes served with Dijon mustard and tiny cornichons) or *escargots à la bourguignonne* (snails smothered in sizzling butter, parsley and generous amounts of garlic). For the latter, you can thank Antonin Carême, the *grand cuisinier* who created the dish for a dinner hosted by Talleyrand in 1814 in honour of Alexander I of Russia.

Before leaving Burgundy's bountiful table, make sure to stop at L'Hôtel-Dieu in Beaune. The former almshouse is now a museum housed in an impressive Gothic building with roofs boasting glazed multicoloured tiles in extraordinary geometric patterns. Also noteworthy is Autun's Cathédrale St-Lazare. Dating to the mid-12th century and famous for its magnificent sculptures and tympanum, it is one of the city's most stunning icons.



The *kir* was named after the mayor of Dijon, Félix Kir who, during his time in office, often welcomed visitors to the *mairie* with the fruity drink.



Plat

Nouvelle-Aquitaine



To the west, our main dish awaits in Nouvelle-Aquitaine, the largest region in France and one of great geographical contrasts: from Poitou-Charentes with its enchanting, fairytale-like Marais Poitevin marshlands, to the rugged landscapes of Pyrénées-Atlantiques, where the Basque Country proudly distinguishes itself with its own language, culture and cherished traditions.

In the heartland of this area, especially in the departments of Dordogne and Lot-et-Garonne, ducks and geese are the culinary gems featured on menus of restaurants serving regional fare. Entrées include silky foie gras sprinkled with *fleur de sel* and served on toasted brioche or crusty bread, while duck specialities such as *magret de canard* and *confit de canard* are offered as mains. *Magret*, the breast, is grilled or pan-fried in its own fat and best enjoyed medium-rare with a side of parsleyed potatoes (*pommes sarladaises*). The rest of the duck is preserved as *confit* and utterly delectable with a simply dressed *frisée* salad and an elegant bottle of Pêcheur, one of the 13 appellations of the Bergerac wine region.

British expat Tina Raison, a jewellery designer and artist based in the medieval village of Duras, counts *magret* and *confit* as favourite dishes, but what attracted her to Lot-

et-Garonne back in 1999 was the stunning scenery and relaxed lifestyle: “I love the rolling hills and picturesque historic towns with their traditional bars and restaurants,” she says. “Summer fields are a gorgeous mix of fruiting vines, vibrant sunflowers, stands of maize, wheat, and of course, the regional cattle, Blondes d’Aquitaine, all set among oak woodlands, plum and hazelnut trees - just beautiful!”

If duck does not appeal, head west to Bordeaux - the capital of Gironde and gateway to the region’s noble vineyards - and feast on a succulent *entrecôte à la bordelaise* (rib-eye steaks with red wine sauce, shallots and bone marrow). Further south in the Pays Basque, the region’s rustic cuisine gradually gives way to colourful dishes generously seasoned with *piment d’Espelette*. Come the late summer, bunches of the bright red peppers are hung to dry from the facades of houses in the pretty village of Espelette, before being ground into a delicately spicy condiment used in regional classics such as *poulet basquaise* and *piperade*. With tomatoes, onions and red and green peppers, these dishes reflect the colours of the Basque flag. The addition of Bayonne ham, a regional speciality, is quite common in both.



Fromage

Hauts-de-France

For our cheese course, we head to Hauts-de-France in the north. The region is known for its historic cities graced with marvellous architecture, wide stretches of fertile flatlands, sandy dunes, magnificent woodlands, and spectacular coastlines with handsome seaside towns such as Le Touquet-Paris-Plage and Wimereux. There’s plenty of

seafood, and in fact Boulogne-sur-Mer is France’s largest fishing port. But with the colder, wet climate, the regional cuisine is mainly characterised by rich comfort foods and strong, gutsy cheeses that are particularly delightful either before or instead of dessert.

Maroilles is one of the most famous cheeses of the north

and the only one in Nord-Pas-de-Calais to be granted AOC certification in 1976. The origins of the brick-shaped cheese can be traced back to the 10th century when it was first made by Benedictine monks in the abbey of the eponymous village. Made from cow’s milk, the soft, earthy cheese has a pungent, heady aroma and a reddish-

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Dessert

Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur



We culminate our four-course food tour of France in the sun-drenched southern region of Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur, a golden land of plenty that entices the senses with spectacular landscapes and sweet aromas. Private chef and food writer Mel Sinclair left her native Orkney in 2007 and now lives in Mandelieu-la-Napoule with her French husband and two young sons. “PACA is a very diverse area with so much to offer. There are so many nationalities here and the proximity for travel is immense,” she says. “Within an hour you can be at the market in Italy, within five hours the other

direction you can be sauntering through Barcelona. We can have the bright lights and glamour of La Croisette in Cannes, or more simply, tranquil time exploring the Estérel massif and the breathtaking views. Every time I run at sunrise, I stop and think how lucky I am to live in such a beautiful place.”

When it comes to desserts, the *Tarte Tropézienne* is a ‘must-try’ according to Mel. Consisting of a brioche cake filled with vanilla cream and topped with pearl sugar, it was first made in St-Tropez in 1955 by Polish baker Alexandre Micka. Should you be in the mood for a more delicate end to your meal, try *calissons* (left), the pride of Aix-en-Provence. The yellow and white, almond-shaped sweets are made from a paste of crushed candied melons and blanched ground almonds.

Fresh fruit, of course, is not a bad option either. The region is famous for its succulent Solliès figs, muscat du Ventoux grapes and Cavaillon melons. Considering the rich dishes that led to dessert, that may just be the most sensible thing to do! LF



The *Tarte Tropézienne* (right) was served on the set of the movie *Et Dieu... créa la femme*, starring Brigitte Bardot, who took a liking to it and suggested it be named after the glamorous town.



orange rind. A ripe Maroilles pairs exceptionally well with sliced pears and a well-structured gewürztraminer, but it is also eaten for breakfast (dipped in coffee!), used in sauces and found in regional specialities such as the *tarte au maroilles* and the *flamiche*.

Another excellent cheese is Mimolette. The hard, round

cheese has an aroma reminiscent of hazelnuts and a slightly toasted, caramel taste. Originating in the city of Lille, it has a history that goes back to the Franco-Dutch war. At the time, the French were quite fond of Dutch Edam, much to the disapproval of King Louis XIV who not only banned the import of Dutch products, but also demanded the

creation of a French version of the cheese. To give Mimolette its distinct appearance, it is coloured with either carotene or annatto (a natural pigment). Mites are part of the cheese’s ageing process. They are brushed on the surface and make tiny craters that allow air to circulate through the cheese paste and enhance its flavour. But don’t worry – the

mites (*‘ciron’* in French) are harmless and probably long gone by the time you eat the cheese, which is perfect with a juicy bunch of grapes and a spicy, red Châteauneuf-du-Pape.